Research and Scientific cooperation: the actions and ambitions of ECOWAS

Abdoulaye Maga
ECOWAS Director of Education, Culture, Science and Technology
abdoulaym@gmail.com

Interview conducted by

Mame-Penda Ba
Professor of Political Science, Senegal
Editor-in-Chief, *Global Africa*
mame-penda.ba@ugb.edu.sn

Mahaman Tidjani Alou
Professor of Political Science, Niger
Head of Global Africa's Junior Research Institute
tidjanialou@yahoo.fr

How to cite this paper:
Maga, A.I., (2023). Research and Scientific cooperation: the actions and ambitions of ECOWAS.
Global Africa, (3), pp. 243-249.
https://doi.org/10.57832/j3e7-kk27

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Hello Professor Maga, it's a great pleasure to be able to talk to you about the «Pan-Africanism and African research» issue of *Global Africa journal. Alongside Commissioner Fatou Sow* Sarr[1], you are in charge of education, culture, science and technology at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Could you tell us about your department and, more generally, the Human Development and Social Affairs Department? Why such a specific field within ECOWAS?

Professor Maga: Since the 2021 reform, our activities are no longer carried out by the department in charge of education, science and culture but by a new department called «Human Development and Social Affairs». This department includes: Humanitarian Affairs, Social Affairs, the Gender Centre based in Dakar, the Youth and Sports Centre based in Ouagadougou, and the Education, Science and Culture Department, which I head. The mandate given to us by my board is to promote human capital through the harmonization of national policies and strategies in these three different fields, in order to pool resources and foster sustainable development within the framework of integration.

Few people are aware of ECOWAS's missions outside of conflict management and political facilitation, but the organization is heavily involved in education and

1 Commissioner for Human Development and Social Affairs.

training. We contribute to capacity-building, training and the employment of young people. One of the first tasks we took on was to set up the General Convention on the Recognition and Equivalence of Degrees. This important ECOWAS convention was designed in 2003 to enable the creation of a regional research area alongside the Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (CAMES), to increase the mobility of students and academic staff in order to facilitate their sub-regional integration and the creation of the "ECOWAS of peoples", through education, training and culture. To achieve this, we also needed a science and technology policy, which was validated in 2012 after years of joint production, and which we call Ecopost. It is on the basis of this policy and its action plan that we articulate everything we do today in terms of research. For example, the funding of research through programs such as the PARI program (Programme d'appui à la recherche et à l'innovation), which is a competitive mechanism for selecting the two best research projects in the fields of life and earth sciences, as well as basic sciences. It is open to consortia, i.e. groups of laboratories from ECOWAS's three linguistic blocs (anglophone, francophone and lusophone). For each category (life and earth sciences and basic sciences), we are offering $200,000 each year to enable these laboratories to continue to operate and innovate.

Every two years, we organize the African Research and Innovation Forum (Fari), a platform for exchange and discussion between scientists, technologists, innovators, decision-makers, the public-private sector, technical and financial partners (TFPs), and students with the aim of improving public understanding of the role and importance of science, raising the profile of scientific research in our region, and opening up new prospects for partnerships between stakeholders, research, the private sector, and so on. On this occasion, we also award prizes to the best start-ups selected by the States and put into competition during the forum. The next forum will be held in 2024. The forum is a venue for all those involved in the sciences to meet, exchange ideas, exhibit and showcase research progress.

We also offer scholarships for masters, doctoral theses and postdocs for which the humanities and social sciences are also eligible.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: There are many definitions of pan-Africanism, each focusing on a particular aspect. How do you see education, research and science as essential components of pan-Africanism?

Professor Maga: When we talk about pan-Africanism, we're necessarily talking about cultural renaissance. As you know, for the African Union (AU), integration must first take place at regional level, then at continental level. Our vision and our struggle are to use culture as a factor of integration, all aspects of culture, not just folklore, but everything that can help to affirm this integration. We're working on it, but it's a long-term project. ECOWAS's cultural policy, which was adopted barely six years ago, was preceded by a cultural framework agreement dating back to 1987. The agreement between the Heads of State on culture promoted, among other things, certain aspects of West African culture as elements that could contribute to neighborly diplomacy and the resolution of certain conflicts. ECOWAS also works closely with the AU on language policies, as language is a very important vehicle for integration. Indeed, were it not for the colonial borders that divided and still divide, we would find the same cultures on both sides of the different countries and the same populations exchanging in their own languages, and not those of the colonizer. That's why together with the AU and the African Academy

of Languages, we're working to promote national languages by setting up an ECOWAS prize for excellence in national languages, in particular the three major cross-border languages identified in West Africa: Hausa, Fulfulde and Mandinka.

Science is also a factor of integration. For example, we are considering the launch of an ECOWAS observation satellite for the region, which could provide information and answers on aspects linked to the evolution of epidemics, natural resources and environmental issues, natural disasters, agriculture and food security, conflicts, early warning, education, research and health services[2]. For this costly but extremely important project to be useful, it is imperative that countries, researchers, experts and citizens be involved, work closely together, and that the data produced enable us to make better decisions that can improve people's lives.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: You said that ECOWAS is limited to issues of peace and security, and economic issues because of the common market, etc. But education, science and technology are almost never associated with ECOWAS. Yet you tell us that these issues are important. How do you explain this disconnect? Why are such important issues not associated in the minds of ECOWAS citizens with the work you do?

Professor Maga: I don't think it's just the field of education that is not very visible in the actions carried out by ECOWAS. We must remember that the creation of ECOWAS in 1975 was linked to the ambition to promote regional economic integration. Much has been achieved in this respect, as demonstrated by the progress made towards free movement. The political challenges of building democracy are another major thrust of ECOWAS's work, and these two aspects take priority in the perception of the region's citizens, even though they are only two elements among many.

Our mission, once again, is to harmonize sectorIal policies so that we can have the human capital capable of meeting all the region's challenges. It's true that we don't communicate well enough, but it must also be said that people don't go to the information platforms. If they were to visit the ECOWAS websites regularly, they would see the internal press releases issued for each major meeting where we often talk about the results achieved. There are always several levels of communication (commissions, ECOWAS, states, partner institutions, and media) and they all need to work so that citizens have access to the relevant information in the end.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Could you remind us of the funding you have at your disposal? Because when you talk about prizes, scholarships and the forum, we get the impression that it's a symbolic drop in the ocean of our needs, that the means deployed aren't really capable of changing the course of things. What could trigger a transformation of the sector, however, is undoubtedly structural and substantial funding; yet none of the 15 countries for which you are responsible has reached the target of 1% of GDP devoted to research funding, following the resolution taken by the Heads of States at the AU Summit in 2007. How do you see the future of research in this context?

Professor Maga: Our resources are extremely limited...very, very, very limited. There are many reasons for this, the first of which is that, unfortunately, the region is experiencing a lot of difficulties linked to insecurity. Secondly, the bulk of the ECOWAS budget comes from the community levy, i.e. the 0.5% imposed on goods from non-ECOWAS member states. This levy accounts for around 90% of the ECOWAS budget.

2 https://old22.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FR-ECOSAT-EOI-.pdf

Although we are extremely pleased with this internal mobilization of our own resources which saves us from external dependence, it is clearly insufficient to cover our many competing priorities, and in the region, everything has become a priority.

As far as the Lagos action plan is concerned, even South Africa has not yet achieved this 1%. But at ECOWAS, we always remind ourselves of this famous percentage. We did so in 2012 with the Ecopost policy, and in 2014, the Heads of States and Governments adopted the Additional Act on Improving the Performance of Higher Education and Scientific Research in which they reiterated and encouraged member states to do their best to achieve this percentage. Some countries are making great efforts. In West Africa, Nigeria is a good example, as is Ghana.

Unfortunately, we have to recognize that in some of our countries, science and research are not seen as real pillars of development. French- and Portuguese-speaking countries are lagging behind but we have to keep up the pressure so that research eventually becomes a real pillar of development because this is not just the responsibility of the regional economic communities, but of the entire academic and scientific community to show that they are not just protesters, and to support what the regional economic communities are doing.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Specifically, how do you see academics becoming advocates for research and research funding? In other words, you mentioned competing priorities in terms of security, agriculture, health, economics, politics and so on. At Global Africa, we deeply believe that research is precisely the transdisciplinary field that must inform all sectors. Has your department succeeded in positioning research as a necessity and an asset for all sectors, and from this point of view, in making it an imperative, somewhat along the lines of gender mainstreaming?

Professor Maga: It's not easy. We have done this kind of advocacy but it hasn't borne fruit so far. I remember that in 2019, one of our commissioners who was also an academic, proposed that we take Nigeria as a model and set up a Trust Fund financed from oil. It could have financed the education system but also scientific research. At the same time, it would have enabled us to broaden our mission and build, for example, laboratories or research centers to ensure cooperation of the highest caliber between researchers in the region. This idea, unfortunately, never went through because within the framework of the community levy, countries refused to include oil. Until recently, despite the Dangote refinery, Nigeria exported its crude oil while importing refined products. Nigeria refused because the quantities it imported were so large. On the other hand, this country had the intelligence to apply this model to its internal education system, taking a certain percentage of the oil products to feed its Trust Fund and equip all the universities, schools, laboratories, etc. This is why we have the impression that Nigeria's universities are exceptional; they are large with very substantial resources. They're big with very substantial resources.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: What is the relationship between your department and the business sector? How are researchers' discoveries put to good use? How is this research translated and transformed in the private sector?

Professor Maga: We work rather well with the private sector. I told you about the Fari where the private sector is involved with a panel dedicated precisely to questions of relations between research and the private sector but in addition, our mobility grant program has an internship component for technical education and vocational training. It should also be pointed out that other departments do

a considerable amount of work with the private sector in the field of training. In fact, ECOWAS has just signed agribusiness financing agreements with a number of private and public training centers for capacity-building in member states. The budget is a modest one million dollars, but it's just the beginning.

On the other hand, we have not yet begun to popularize the innovators' products with the general public or industrialists, as this is basically not our role. It's up to each innovator, award-winning or not, to ensure that their innovation is protected, whether by the African Intellectual Property Organization («AIPO») or the World Intellectual Property Organization («WIPO»). Then, it's up to the innovator to demonstrate the effectiveness of his or her discovery at various forums to attract industrialists and potential investors.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Support for innovators, whether at national or community level, is very limited and the weight on innovators is very heavy: legal, economic, communication, in addition to the scientific work... Let's move on to the question of endogenous knowledge. In promoting science, culture and education, do you also value non-academic African knowledge?

Professor Maga: Indeed, take the pharmacopoeia for example. A few years ago, our West African Health Organization (WAHO) published a reference list of the region's medicinal plants which all researchers can use in their work. As part of the Commission's research and innovation support program (PARI), we have asked all consortia wishing to apply in this particular field to refer to the WAHO reference list and see how they can use the plants that exist in our region to come up with something innovative.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Indeed, pharmacopoeia and traditional medicine are of primary interest, but in Africa we have many other fields in which to draw on endogenous knowledge. For example, farmers' knowledge about protecting biodiversity and ecosystems and about climate change. Is anthropology of environmental and climatic knowledge an important area of research for you?

Professor Maga: Perhaps not at the level of our department. However, other departments or divisions are interested in these issues, such as the Department of Agriculture and the Environment. I know that at the level of agriculture, they are promoting land reclamation, they have worked closely with farmers in the region as part of the West African Agricultural Policy (WAP), and our colleagues have relied on local knowledge to store rainwater.

As far as our department is concerned, we're moving towards this kind of approach, valuing local knowledge. Our new commissioner is a sociologist, so the social sciences will naturally be given greater consideration in the revision of future policies. Science and technology policies will be reviewed, as will cultural policies. All these dimensions, hitherto more or less neglected, will now be taken into account.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: you talked about the three linguistic groups, and we all know that the language of science and international cooperation is English. How do you ensure that science also exists in French, Portuguese and African languages?

Professor Maga: We're living in an era of English-language hegemony. To be in the A-ranked journals, we are almost all compelled to write in English However, our role is not to push people to produce in other languages or to encourage French speakers to do better. We cannot force a researcher to publish in a particular journal but we can encourage multilingualism and ensure that the

other languages of the community are well represented - which is why all three languages or at least two, are used at our meetings. Our mission is more about regional cooperation. We carried out a bibliometric study[3] with the AU's African Observatory on Science, Technology and Innovation (Aosti), based in Malabo, and we noticed that West African researchers wrote their articles more with colleagues in former metropolises than in a South-South cooperation framework. This is a real concern for us. It was on the basis of this study that we decided to set up the West African Academy of Sciences. The study has been completed, and we are now in the validation process, with its share of statutory meetings with Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the summit of Heads of States.

The second thing is that, as part of the mobility grant, our aim is to bring English-speakers back to the French-speaking area, and vice versa. This enables English and Portuguese speakers to produce their thesis articles in French, as recommended by certain laboratories and conversely, French speakers in English-speaking areas have all had to write their articles in English.

Ba and Tidjani Alou: Just as the language issue is critical, so is that of publishing and disseminating African research. Almost everything is done outside the continent. African university presses, for example, are slowing down and private publishers are disappearing at an alarming rate. What role can ECOWAS play?

Professor Maga: You're absolutely right. In fact, several African publishers have approached us for partnerships, notably for the publication of school textbooks but unfortunately this has not materialized. In fact, we have very little interest in publishing, with the exception of documents on regional policies, studies, the annual reports of the President of the Commission, sectorial reports, and so on.

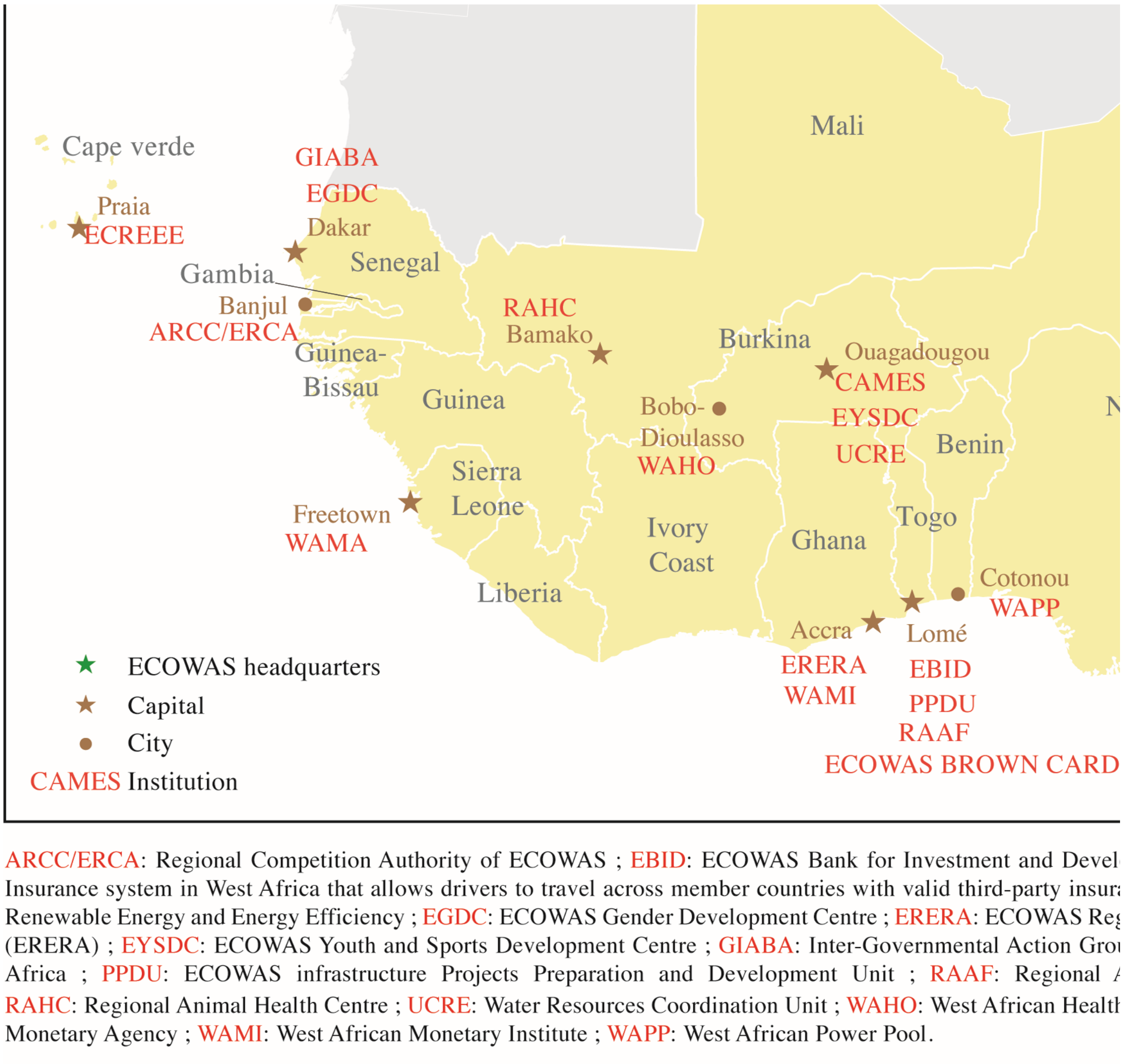
Ba and Tidjani Alou: Among the continent's economic communities, ECOWAS is often seen as a model in terms of the movement of people and goods. The world of research is also a world of mobility. What role has ECOWAS played in this process to ensure that, in the world of research, the ECOWAS of peoples is not just a concept?

Professor Maga: As part of the ECOWAS mobility grant program known as the ECOWAS Nnamdi Azikiwe Academic Mobility Scheme (Enaams), we have encouraged Masters and PhD students to pursue their studies in a language zone other than their own; similarly, in collaboration with the Association of African Universities (AAU), we have promoted the mobility of many academic staff from the region and the diaspora. Today, one of Enaams' sub-components dedicated to internships for young professionals enables graduates to serve in the country of their choice for one year. This type of opportunity is also available with the Youth and Sports Center and the West African Health Organization (WAHO).

Ba and Tidjani Alou: What cooperation with the Réseau pour l'Excellence de l'Enseignement Supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest (Reesao) and Cames, among others, serves excellence in training and research?

Professor Maga: Reesao and Cames but not the only ones, have been involved in many of our activities such as the development of our science, technology and innovation policy and its action plan, the development of the WAHO regional reference system for medical studies, and that of the Commission on the equivalence of degrees and the harmonization of education systems and so on.

3 African Observatory on Science, Technology and Innovation. https://au.int/fr/node/24401



Headquarters of ECOWAS institutions